

Dirge

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Summary: A young Stoick must handle the many occupational hazards for the Vikings of Berk.

## 1. Chapter 1

\_This is Berk. For seven generations, we Vikings have lived on these shores. The village is old, but the buildings are new, save for one. The Great Hall has stood as a testament to Viking resilience. Taking two generation to carve out of the side of a mountain, the entire Hooligan tribe can be housed behind its nearly seventy-foot wooden doors, and right now my very agitated wife thought of tearing them off their hinges.\_

Valhallarama stared anxiously at the doors of the Great Hall. Behind her rested the elderly, children, and infirmed of Berk. Attending injured, the elder Gothi and other healers drifted among the rows of bed rolls.

"We should be out there," she grumbled. "At least to command the catapults."

Her companion merely laughed at Valhallarama's impatience. She held a nursing babe to her breast while a double-headed battle-ax leaned against her leg. As former shield maidens, they had been tasked to protect the doors of the Great Hall. The dragons rarely ventured this far from the herds and food stores, but the added protection did calm the children. In addition, it supposedly gave the former warriors an active role in the battle.

"Jorgen would have my head if I let you out there." Sugarbee Hofferson noticed the lack of pressure on her breast. The child had detached herself, and a trickle of milk dribbled down her chin. "I think Astrid has finally had enough. I hope yours is not nearly as greedy."

"If he's anything like his lummoX of father, he'll nurse me drier than Gobber's yak jerky."

Sugarbee tucked a loose strand of her blonde hair behind her ear as she tried to shift her child to her other hip. Covering her exposed breast, she looked down at her partner's swollen belly.

"You only have a month more to wait, Val," she commented. "By then the Freeze will set, and you'll have all winter to cuddle with your baby."

"Nothing like being trapped inside with a whimpering husband and crying child. Maybe I should just face a Gronckle and be done with it."

"Valhallarama, how on earth did Stoick ever convince you to give up your sword? The man must speak sweeter than honey."

"I believe a lot of your father's mead was involved. Before I knew any better, he was presenting his morning-gift."

Sugarbee shook her head as she recalled the courtship of Stoick Haddock and his fierce shield maiden. The wild-haired woman had furiously rejected at least three suitors prior to Stoick. Many had assumed she would never lay down her sword for any man. Then the chief's son was seen talking to her father. Six months later, she had never seen a happier woman wearing a bridal crown.

Valhallarama winced as she felt movement in her womb. Recently the child had become more restless. The midwife had threaten to strap her to a bed if she did not rest more. A moment later another flash of pain crossed her face.

"Val?"

"It's okay, Bee. He's quite the kicker."

What followed next alerted the healers and midwife to Valhallarama's distress. With a scream, she nearly fell from her bench facing the door if not for the quick hand of Sugarbee Hofferson. Ignoring the wails of her own daughter, she shouted for the midwife who was helping Gothi with the children. Ruffcloth Thorston rushed past the village elder. Valhallarama was not due for another month, and moments mattered if what she feared was happening.

"Her water's broken." Sugarbee aided Valhallarama to the meade hall floor.

"This is much too soon," Ruffcloth grimaced as she tried to calm the woman. "No choice now. Sugarbee, get your mother and any of the free women healers."

Leaving behind her ax, Sugarbee raced to follow the midwife's orders. Always the good soldier, she understood the need to obey orders. She handed Astrid over to an older child for safe keeping. She found only one healer not preoccupied with saving the life of a fallen warrior. Grabbing her mother, the village elder, she informed her of Valhallarama's situation.

"I know you want to help, child," Gothi soothed her daughter, "but

the best you can do is to resume your post. We don't want to frighten the children."

Sugarbee nodded and returned to the bench facing the door. For fear of further harming mother and child, Ruffcloth refused to move Valhallarama from the spot she had been lain on the floor. Attempting to calm her nerves, Sugarbee sharpened her ax with a whetstone as the sound muffled the painful cries behind her.

"A hiccup!" Jorgen fumed as he surveyed the wreckage left in the dragon's wake. "A Loki gifted hiccup!"

"It's amazing the child even lived." Gothi glared at the giant in front of her. As the last surviving member of her generation, she was afforded the respect of the village. Being spiritually attuned to the gods had made her feared. She would not let Jorgen the Relentless intimidate her.

"The mistake should be left for the boars in the forest."

"I will do no such thing, father."

Jorgen quickly turned on his eldest son. Never one to question his orders, he was both proud and appalled at Stoick. Pride in standing his ground to his chief, and appalled at disrespecting his father.

"The child will live. I have already performed the reading."

Both men looked at the gray-haired woman. Typically she would perform the child's reading following the naming ceremony, but she feared the child would not survive the night.

"And?" Stoick's face barely hid the anxiety swelling within his chest. In one night, he had nearly lost his wife and son due to a cruel turn of fate.

"I saw endless skies. I don't understand its full meaning, but his life will be a long one."

Jorgen nearly snared at the prediction but knew he had lost this battle. The boy would take his place in the procession of chiefs.

"Hiccup Horrendous Haddock," Jorgen muttered under his breath.

"What, father?"

"The boy's name. Hiccup Horrendous Haddock." Jorgen repeated with a cruel smile on his lips. "The Third."

"What an awful name for a child," Gothi rebuked her chief.

"I have decided the child's name. If we cannot dispose of the runt, we should address him as one."

"Father?"

"No, Stoick." Without waiting from a reply from either elder or son,

Jorgen left the two to continue his inspection."

Stoick furrowed his brow at the retreating figure of his father. He heard the string of curse that were forming on his tongue beside him. Looking down at the diminutive woman, Stoick received a compassionate smile from Gothi.

"Your boy is destined to be more than a...a..." Gothi huffed.

"A hiccup?"

"Your wife will appreciate the name."

"I will handle Valhallarama."

Stoick ducked as the hatchet embedded itself in the doorframe above him. News of the child's name preceded him, and the heir's wife demonstrated her appreciation.

"That son of a troll!"

"Now, honey."

"Don't you dare 'honey' me, Stoick Haddock. How dare that muck faced, wart ridden sack of boar dung call my son a hiccup?!"

"I'll try talking to him about at the naming ceremony."

"No, my son will bare that name."

Stoick looked at his wife dumbfounded. He understood Valhalarama's fury over the boy's name but could not fathom her acceptance.

"My son will redefine hiccup as the true meaning of strength. He will be the mightiest warrior ever to walk the shores of Berk."

Stoick looked at the child sleeping in the cradle by their bed. Barely half the size of his nephew, he hoped for the future he was being promised. First by the village elder, now by his wife.

Jorgen smiled as he surveyed the village from his home above the village. Weeks after the last dragon raid, the village completely hid the evidence aside from the new trophies hung on the eaves of homes.

For generations the Vikings of Berk had battle the dragons. Few dragon raids were repelled as thoroughly as the previous. He doubted the leathery devils would give up so easily. A new raiding party was coming. That he could feel in his bones.

Climbing the stairs to join him, Stoick's face announced grim news. Jorgen hated that face ever since his son was a wee lad. Jorgen's composure was as stony as the totems that littered the island.

"They found rats in some of the winter stores. Almost a quarter are spoiled."

"Tell Bucket to lead another fishing expedition at dawn," Jorgen commanded. "Hopefully they can replenish the lost food."

"Troutarms may have some extra stores. I'll speak with him as well."

Jorgen nodded in agreement. The fishmonger usually had at least one haul remaining in his smokehouse when the winter inventory was taken. If not, informing him about an impending catch would be necessary for him to make preparations for smoking the fish.

As Stoick made to return down the stairs, a low grumble escaped the chief's lips. "How is the boy?"

"Growing fatter every day," Stoick beamed. "He's nearly doubled in size since his naming ceremony."

"Still a bit on the small side then. Hopefully Hiccup will continue to improve. I would hate to think some Terror will fly off with him."

Stoick silently stepped down the stairs. His father continued to belittle his son, and it was growing tiresome.

Halfway down the flight of stairs, he noticed dark shadows in the sky. Squinting his eyes, he discovered a murder of Terrors approaching the village.

"Odin help us," he cursed as he raced to the plaza. Within an hour, the village of Berk was once again battling their deadly foe, the dragons.

Gobber trudged up the hill to the chieftain's home after a long day at his forge. Resupplying the men after the last dragon raid had been particularly grueling. He still had a pile of swords and axes waiting to be repaired, but he had a difficult duty this night. The remaining weapons would have to wait. He could only hope tonight there would be less bloodshed than the previous.

As he approached the house, he noticed the smoke bellowed from its roof. Its master had obviously stoked its fire to warm the dwelling. Even with the Freeze weeks away, Gobber noted the chill in the air. He knocked on the door and stared up into the sky. He was still keeping his watch when the portal opened. Two tall and stout men walked out.

"Sorry for the loss," Gobber said as he met two figures. "Your father was a good man."

"Tonight, Jorgen the Relentless dines in Valhalla," Stoick possessed a stern face as he addressed his old friend. "At least he took three Nadders with him."

"That is if you don't count the two Gronckles that he sent scurrying off to their forsaken nest," laughed the burly man next to him. Stoick joined his brother Spitelout in laughter. Their father would not care for mourning his death in defending his home. The dragon raid had ended with the scaly beast flying over the dark waters with dozens fewer than when they had landed on the hills of Berk.

"At least he saw the birth of two grandsons," Gobber said to the brothers. "Few can claim such honors."

"Except maybe old Gothi. I believe she has nearly a dozen little brats running about."

"It's only the four," Gobber replied but paused a moment as a thought crossed his mind. "Five, her youngest just had a daughter."

Stoick barely listened as his brother and friend discussed the merits of the village elder's expanding family. Having nearly losing his own during the two previous battles did not bode well for his spirit. He would thank Frigg everyday for protecting his wife and son. Stoick left his introspection to focus on the current problems at hand.

"Are all assembled?"

Gobber turned to Stoick and sighed. "Even Mildew is in there, and he's as delightful as ever."

"At least he only runs his mouth." Spitelout and Gobber both nodded as they remembered their sister tribe of Outcasts. "Lets get this over with."

Entering the Great Hall, Stoick was deafened by the roar of arguing Vikings. The untimely death of the chief had sent the village spiraling like a tailless Nightmare. Fiery, uncontrollable, and very, very deadly.

"Enough!"

Every head turned to the huffing Stoick. Catching his breath, he marched to the central fire pit with Gobber and Spitelout trailing behind him.

"Ah, young Stoick has finally decided to bless us with his presence," Mildew scoffed. "I guess we should all bow to his greatness."

"We are Vikings," Stoick growled. "We bow before no one, man or dragon."

Mildew sneered but remained silent. Far from stupid, he already knew the outcome of the night's assembly. He merely wished to keep Stoick in his place. Luckily, he had an ally in that endeavor.

"Then why should we follow the son of Jorgen?"

Stoick looked across the flames at Magnus Hofferson. True to form, Magnus was being as stubborn a Viking as any in the village. He would not blindly follow anyone, especially the elder son of Jorgen Haddock.

"I don't doubt your abilities in battle," Magnus continued. "Already the rumors of you killing a dragon as a wee babe has spread through the village."

Inwardly, Stoick laughed at the story. Apparently some of the children had began to idolize him after he wrestled with Nightmare in the plaza during a raid the previous winter. The rumors were probably being aided by tall-tales told by the blacksmith over a pint. Gobber and his blasted stories.

"But what about running the village?"

Magnus had now drawn the attention of the entire mead hall. "The dragons raid mostly during the harvest, but we spend most of the year repairing the village. We could be known as carpenters rather than dragon hunters."

Murmurs of agreement began to course through the crowd. A smirk grew on Mildew's face. He loved the discord that Stoick would face over the next few days.

"Then what would you suggest, Hofferson?" Stoick asked. "Should we follow the orders of the master shipwright?"

Magnus belted a loud laugh that filled the whole hall. Once he regained his composure, he shook his head. "Nay, nay. I merely wish you understood that it takes more than a warrior to lead this village. You are no longer responsible for merely yourself and sword brothers. You are not even responsible for those gathered in this hall, but for every Hooligan that has and will walk these hills."

Stoick grimaced at the man. During dragon training, the two had been in competition for their first dragon kill. Magnus had constantly chastised him, but the criticism was fair and without malice. It would seem Magnus would again become his greatest critic.

"A vote then?" Magnus grinned as he raised his hand. "All for Stoick Haddock?"

Mildew cringed as a loud chorus of ayes rang off the walls of the mead hall. Laughter soon followed as kegs of mead and ale. Glaring back at his traitorous companion, he left the others to revel in Stoick's ascension. He knew Stoick would lead the Hooligan tribe to ruin, and he only hoped he be around to watch the man brought low.

"Well that stick in the mud is gone," Tuffnut guffawed as he turned back to compatriots. "Another round for the greatest chief of the Hairy Hooligans, Stoick the Really Tall!"

"No, no." Magnus slammed his mug on the tabletop. "Stoick the Smelly."

"Never going to let me live that down."

"Nay lads," Gobber smirked. "To Stoick the Vast!"

The four other men look at each and grinned. Turning to Stoick, four mugs were raised in his honor. "Stoick the Vast!"

Stoick looked down at his mug in embarrassment. His three friends and brother were always trying to find new ways to humiliate him.

"Where is that new babe of yours?" Stoick asked Magnus, hoping to redirect the conversation.

"She's probably wailing in tune with your whelp," Magnus chortled. "I'm suprised I get any sleep at night."

"It's good to be past that point, aye Spitelout?" Tuffnut elbowed the man beside him. Spitelout nearly dropped his mug from the force of the blow.

"Then they start running," Spitelout added. "I can barely keep up with little Snotlout at times. I don't know how you can handle those twins of yours."

"Leashes. Really strong ones. The girl has already managed to chew through one of them."

The five men erupted in bellows of laughter, but then each wondered if Tuffnut was truly joking about his children. From there, the conversation continued about past battles and future glories.

"And then Stoick and I saw the largest zippleback ever to flew the skies," Gobber said in hush tones. "It was sleeping around the large pile bones. Enough bones to cover a boneknapper's scaly hide."

"Augh, not this one again," an inebriated Tuffnut groaned. "Tell us about the time you found that terror in your boot."

Stoick rose from his bench. He had heard all of Gobber's stories back when they were still halfway believable. He walked out into the cold night. He pulled his cloak tighter around him despite the warmth in his belly from the mead. From his perch at the top of the stairs, he could see the lights from each home.

"Feeling any different."

"Not now, Magnus. I'm not in the mood."

"I was only making sure you understood you can be as reckless as before."

Stoick looked at his friend and sighed. "Will you question every order I give you?"

"Only when it's stupid," Magnus said as he handed Stoick a mug of ale. "You are the chief after all."

"Not helping."

"Listen, Stoick. I knew you would be chief ever since we were boys fighting the great oak dragons. I'd follow you to Helheim's Gate and straight into the Dragon's Nest itself. I just want you to make sure what you're doing is right."

Stoick sighed and downed the draught. "I don't need another conscious. Two are more than any man can handle. Plus you're not as pretty in a dress."

"I have the legs for it," Magnus guffawed. Against his better judgment, Stoick joined him.

"About time you got back from cavorting with Gobber," Valhallarama teased as Stoick pushed open the door.

"Nice to see you too, dear," Stoick smiled as he hung his helm on a



peg by the entrance.

"Is it done?"

"I will follow after my ancestors."

Valhallarama smiled down the baby in her arms. Cooing, she told Hiccup that was now the son of the chief.

"Just try not destroy everything before he gets his chance."

"You and Hofferson just cannot give him a moment's peace."

"The man has a good head on his shoulder. He did marry Sugarbee."

Stoick took Hiccup from his wife's arms and traced his finger against the child's chin. Valhallarama smiled as Stoick continued to study the child's face.

"You do this every night, dear," she teased. "They don't grow that fast."

Handing the child back to his mother, Stoick merely harrumphed at the grinning woman. Even after knowing her since childhood, she still could get under his skin at times. The stout woman placed the baby in a cradle by the fire.

"I trust all went as expected."

"Mildew gave his usual tirade." Stoick sat down in his favorite chair next to Hiccup's cradle. The chair creaked under his weight as he relaxed. Smiling, Valhallarama took the seat next to him. She reached into the basket beside her and picked up the unfinished tunic. Homespun wool dyed green from pigments collected from a recent raid of the Angles in Northumbria. She had been hoping to make a new tunic for Stoick, but the man's ever growing girth was her constant foe. Perhaps her little Hiccup would find use of it.

"And what of Magnus?"

"At first he tried to give a list of reasons why I shouldn't be chief, and then led the vote for me. He is the most irritating man I have ever known. You would think he would have outgrown this by now."

"Why, you didn't? He petitioned for Sugarbee's hand, and the next day you're talking to my father. We only announced my pregnancy, and Sugarbee starts showing days afterwards. I imagine you two having pissing matches outside the Great Hall."

"They're inside, and Magnus usually wins."

"Sugarbee must be so proud to know she gave up her ax for such a champion."

Stoick ignored the smirk from his wife as he stoked the fire. She continued her sewing as he stared at the fire. Tomorrow morning, Gothi the elder would announce Stoick as chief of the Hairy Hooligans. His first order of business would be the burial of his

father. It was a two day march from the village to the far side of the island where the Haddock burial mound. He would need to make preparations for the rituals.

"You need to speak with Troutarms tomorrow about his son's naming ceremony. He came by during the meeting."

"Right, the boy was born last week," Stoick mumbled as he added to his mental list. He could also talk to Ingerson about the fishing harvest. As the foremost fishmonger in Berk, he would know about the preparations for winter. Next would be consulting Mulch about the amount of wool collected during the last sheering.

Gothi hobbled back up to her own home on the cliffs of Berk with her younger daughter following behind her. Her eldest son was preparing a cart for her journey with the Haddocks to their ancestral burial mound, but she required a few things she had left behind.

"And remember, a light dusting is coming tomorrow," Gothi instructed her daughter. "Don't let anyone take it as a sign of an early winter. The weather should stay mild for another three weeks."

"Yes, Mother," Sugarbee sighed. Lacking any gift of prophecy, the people of the village would still ask for her thoughts about whatever troubled them. Only those who trained in the kill ring with her would give her a wide berth concerning such matters. Her younger siblings never had to worry about these nuisances. Drone was too enthralled to his meadry while her sister Stinger preferred the minding the till of her ship.

"Now, tell that husband of yours to ease up on Stoick a bit," Gothi said as she stepped up into her hovel. "He was fairly tame last night, but they are not two boys anymore."

"He plans on being a spur in Stoick boot until the day one kills the other," Sugarbee laughed. "I fear he might just start a blood feud for the laughs."

"Well there's only a few ways to avoid that," Gothi smirked.

Sugarbee narrowed her eyes at her mother. Her father had hoped to marry his younger daughter to the future chief of Berk, but Stoick only had eyes for Valhallarama.

"What do you need, Mother?"

Pointing to a satchel hanging by the door, Gothi smiled at her daughter. While Sugarbee snatched the bag from its hook, Gothi picked up a small keg of her sons' finest mead. Her two boys had followed after their father in running the meadry. While she heard Magnus preferred the bitter taste of ale, she knew her daughter retained a desire for the sweetness of mead.

"A little bit of home during the trip," Gothi told her daughter.

Sugarbee rolled her eyes at her mother. In all her twenty-years, she had never understood her mother. At times, the village elder was as solemn as a tomb, and other times, she was worst than any of the

village children.

"I'll take the satchel. You carry the mead."

"Why not ask Stinger for some from the meadry?"

"It tastes better when it's been up here for a few weeks."

"You're just being difficult," Sugarbee sighed.

"Maybe I wanted to spend sometime with my daughter." Gothi shouldered her satchel and looked up at her daughter. "You'll understand once Astrid is married."

"I don't know why you left Drone's home to live up on these cliffs."

"To be closer to the gods," Gothi said as she lifted her hands to the sky. "Plus, your nephew's crying could wake the dead."

The two slowly made the climb down the cliffs to the village. The funeral procession was mostly formed when they entered the plaza. Valhallarama was sitting on the cart bearing the linen-wrapped body of her father-in-law. Tied in a sling across her chest, her son noiseless slept. As the wife of the village chief, she would take her place beside her husband as his father was entombed. Spitelout's family would remain in the village, which would leave her alone with Gothi. The two carts for the body and provisions would be driven by the women, while the two men would march before and after the procession.

"Ah, you brought the mead," Valhallarama guffawed. "I was beginning to doubt you would remember."

"I would not hike up that wretched mountain for nothing less. I even talked my own child into carrying it for me."

Sugarbee glared at the two laughing women. Being treated as a beast of burden was not the role of the fiercest shieldmaiden of Berk. Her first kill had been in the kill ring against a green-plumed nadder. While not nearly the status of Stoick's nightmare, at least she had not waited until her second raid as a defender like Valhallarama.

"I believe Magnus has looked after Astrid long enough," Sugarbee huffed as she contemplated dropping the keg on her mother's foot.

She ignored the amused glances of the other women as she left them. Her pride needed to be soothed, and nursing her daughter would calm her temper. At least she would not have to deal with those two stubborn mules and the yaks pulling their carts for the next few days.

Gothi fawned over Hiccup as she rode next Valhallarama. Spitelout was driving her own cart during the second day of their journey, and Gothi decided she would rather help the young mother with her child. She adored babies, and the child in her hands was no exception. Hiccup stared up wide-eyed at the woman with a still face.

"Such a quiet thing," Gothi commented. "None of mine would stay so

calm."

Valhallarama laughed. "You should hear him when he's hungry. Thor's hammer never rang so loud."

Gothi looked down at the babe's face. As with all children, she performed a reading shortly after his birth. While his parents had hoped for a future paved in glory and honor, she only foresaw open skies. Stoick did not seem impressed by the prophecy, but Valhallarama believed her son would venture out into the world.

"The mound is just over this ridge." Stoick shouted back to the others. "I'll clear the way for the carts."

The foliage before them was overgrown from years of neglect. Most families had their ancestral burial mounds away from Berk due to dragon raids. Aside from avoiding their forefathers vanishing in plumes of black smoke, the smell of burning corpses took forever to air out.

Normally Gothi would perform the funeral rites in town and only escort the party out of the plaza, but Jorgen Haddock being the village chief earned her presence at his interment. He was the second chief she had buried and regretfully may not be the last. Jorgen did not serve his son well in diminishing his stubbornness and rashness, but then the Hoffersons were always meant to counter this behavior. Her husband had told stories of Magnus's uncle Erick and Jorgen bashing heads during their youth. Erick had even stolen Jorgen's right to slay their first dragon.

By midday, Jorgen was resting with his ancestors. During the private ritual, Spitelout took the name of his father. It had become a practice that younger sons would take the name of their father to preserve a single line of heirs. While Spitelout Haddock walked out of Berk, Spitelout Jorgenson would return.

"We best be heading back," Stoick said as he resealed the tomb. "I doubt the bloody beasts will return so soon, but I don't want Gobber burning down the forge again."

Gothi slowly rose back onto her own cart while Stoick joined Valhallarama and Hiccup. He smiled at his wife and took up the reins to the yaks.

"Yah!" Stoick shouted as he cracked the reins to drive the yaks forward. Gothi followed suit with her own chargers while Spitelout sat beside her with a mug of mead in hand.

## 2. Chapter 2

\_Harvest for most villages would be a time of celebration. A year long toil would finally produce the fruits of its labor. Here on Berk, harvest time also means the beginning of the dragon raids. From the last weeks of summer until the beginning of the Freeze, swarms of dragons would descend upon our village. If it can be eaten, it's taken. If it can be burn, it's burned. All that stands between us and starvation is a sword and shield.\_

"Hold your ground!"

Stoick turned to see a murder of terrors fall upon the defenders. With a grunt, he hurled a large net at the incoming invaders, trapping them beneath its weight.

"Somebody take those vermin to the ring," Stoick ordered. He spotted Magnus lopping the head off a Nadder.

"We got two more nightmares chasing the herd," Hoark huffed as he approached the chief. Attempting to catch his breath, he pointed down to the pasture. A pair of nightmares were driving the herd of yaks into the waiting claws of deadly nadders.

"Tell Phelgma to take her maidens and guard the storehouse. I'll handle those two."

Hoark nodded and raced off to find the shield-maidens, while Stoick charge off to the pasture. He found Bucket and Mulch desperately trying to redirect the stampeding herd.

"Forget the yaks," Stoick shouted. "Just kill those dragons."

Giving each other a nod, Bucket and Mulch raised their pitchforks and roared a battle cry. Joining Stoick, the three fearlessly charged the flaming dragons. The first quickly fell to the attack, but the second, warned by the death wail of its compatriot, ignored the frightened herd to face the Vikings. Far from its shot limit, he created a wall of flames before his opponents.

"Alright, beastly," Stoick grinned as he tightened his grip on his hammer. "You want to play rough, do ya?"

As if understanding the taunt, the Nightmare snarled at the towering Viking chief. With fierce battle cries, the two combatants rushed the short distance separating them. The nightmare snapped its maw down on the head of Stoick's hammer. Undeterred, Stoick flicked the weapon, shattering the fore teeth. The nightmare roared in pain as the molten hammer was jabbed further up into its cranium. Moments later, two dead nightmares littered the sheep field.

Stoick did not waste another thought on the former foe. Giving orders for Mulch and Bucket to herd the frighten sheep back to the barn, Stoick ran to rejoin the battle in the plaza. The trainees were busy dowsing the burning buildings under the direction of Gobber.

"Let it burn," the blacksmith shouted. "It's too far gone to save now. Just focus the Jorgenson home now. It might only need a new roof."

Two blonde teenage girls nodded and tossed the bucket of water on the smoldering roof. Stoick ignored the bucket brigade and paused only to grab a new sword from a stockpile outside of the forge.

"Stoick, we have a problem," Spitelout said as the chief joined him the plaza. "Something is attacking the ships."

"How many have been lost?"

"Only three so far," his brother replied. "Never seen anything like it before."

"We'll worry about the boats later." Stoick looked up at the sky to see the retreating forms of dragon take to the air. "Its about over now. We'll discuss this in morning."

"A night fury?" Stoick questioned as the council sat around the large central table of the Great Hall. "They're nothing but legends."

"It was like the judgement of Thor itself," the poor fisherman replied. "I was just trying to secure my boat, when the longboat at the far end of the pier exploded."

The fisherman further explained a loud wail preceded the explosion of the next ship.

"I have faced down gronckles and naders before, but I am not ashamed to admit I ran away from the destruction. Even my own lost boat was a small price to pay."

"Why are we listening to this coward? He ran away like a frightened child," Mildew complained.

"I don't recall seeing you out defending the village," Magnus snorted.

"I protected my own cabbage fields," Mildew retaliated. "I have to look after my own since now one else will left a blasted finger..."

"Enough," Stoick snapped before a shouting match began. "Gobber, what does the book say about this?"

"Not much," Gobber sighed as he flipped the pages of the Dragon Manual. "But my granddad told me stories about a wailing ghost of the Celts. It gave warnings about death. And all we know about the night fury is that they are the unholy offspring of lightning and death. Maybe Thor had a bit of fun during a raid."

Aside from questioning the lightning god's choice in companions, little remained to be discussed of the previous night's battle. All that was left was to rebuild and prepare for the next attack. Two longboats and five smaller ships were destroyed along with two homes. A dozen other homes required repairs to varying degrees. Luckily it was still months until the signs of the Freeze, and the weather was still somewhat warm.

As the meeting dispersed, Stoick noticed a missing figure from the council. Turning to Gobber, he questioned about the location of the tribe's spiritual leader.

"Old Gothi's trying to break in her new apprentice," Gobber laughed. "I heard she's quite the handful."

"Can't be any worse than Hiccup," Stoick sighed as he walked over to his home just below the Great Hall's entrance. "The boy can hardly hold still long enough to learn a blasted thing."

"Give it time, Stoick," Gobber suggested. "The child's only eight."

"Yes, and I could already hold a sword by then."

Gobber left his friend to his family as he continued down to the forge. Dragon raids were good for business. Aside from repairing and replacing the village's weapons, he also needed to make parts for the ruined ships and buildings. It was beginning to become too much work for just one blacksmith.

Walking through the plaza, he spotted Gothi with her young apprentice placing a poultice on the wounds of the injured. The young girl barely watched the old woman as her attention was riveted upon a boy attacking the wooden dragon.

"Astrid," Gothi chided in her now raspy voice. "Pay attention, child."

"Yes, Grandmother," the child replied. With the child's focus again upon the injured limb, Gothi continued wrapping the arm with the poultice and bandage.

"Morning, Gothi," Gobber greeted. "Missed you at the meeting."

Gothi looked over to her apprentice and gave a nod.

"Grandmother said the healers needed to rest after last night. Tending the injured was more important than listening to a bunch..." Astrid paused to look at her grandmother, but only received a nod in reply. "A bunch of drunken louts crying over split mead."

"It was a bit more than that, Gothi," Gobber replied directly to the old woman while ignoring her younger mediator. "Poor Ack had a nasty run-in with a night fury."

Gothi's brow furrowed at the news. She began muttering under her breathe. Astrid nodded as she followed along with her grandmother.

"Grandmother will look into it once she is done here. We only have a few more to see."

"Thanks, girlie," Gobber smiled at Astrid. He turned to Gothi and smirked. "You should try some tea for your sore throat."

Gothi glared at the large Viking as he walked back to his forge. Turning back to her apprentice, she again saw Astrid watching the Snotlout Jorgenson practicing with against a wooden gronckle. Now under the watchful eye of his father, Snotlout was attempting to strike at the gronckle's midsection with his wooden sword.

Gothi shook her head and motioned for the next patient. While Astrid was highly aware of both the natural and spiritual worlds, she showed little interest in her studies. Of all her grandchildren, Astrid demonstrated the most potential following her as the village priestess.

"Child, return home," Gothi instructed. "I can handle things from here."

Astrid gave her grandmother a large open smile revealing her missing left front tooth. She gathered her own satchel of supplies and ran

toward her home. Gothi smiled and focused on the burnt leg of her patient.

Hiccup was not happy as he pushed aside the bushes. After spending most of the morning tied to a tree courtesy of the Thorston twins, now he was about a lecture from his father either for being late for supper or allowing the two troublemakers for luring him into such an obvious trap.

"Gnomes," Hiccup grunted as he stepped over a mud puddle. "No one has ever seen one on Berk before. I should have been looking for trolls. At least they are sometime spotted sneaking away with someone's socks."

As he entered the village, he heard snickering coming from behind the gates. Leaning against the post and fencing, Snotlout and the Thorstons pointed at Hiccup's ragged appearance.

"Find any gnomes on the way home," Snotlout teased. "Maybe an elf or two?"

Hiccup gave a defeated face as he silently walked away from the laughing children. His cousin enjoyed torturing him especially. They would sometimes pick on Astrid or Fishlegs, but Hiccup was their favorite victim.

The climb up the hill was more tortuous as waiting at top was his glowering father. Stoick the Vast was certainly living up to his name. He was larger than life. It was impossible to follow in his footsteps.

"What was it this time?"

"Gnomes," Hiccup admitted with a bowed head. "The twins thought it would be good idea to use me for bear bait instead."

"At least you managed to free yourself this time," Stoick grumbled. "Your mother fixed cabbage stew."

Hiccup brightened at the mention of his mother's cabbage stew. It was his favorite meal, but it was rare treat since Valhallarama hated dealing Mildew. The old man always found something to complain about when he came into town.

The pair entered the cottage and were greeted by the warmth of the fire and the aroma of fresh bread. Valhallarama was busily sharpening her sword at the table.

"Found the boy," Stoick announced as he took his seat at the table.

Hiccup gave an embarrassed smile and grabbed three bowls from a cabinet. After spooning the stew, Hiccup took his place at the table.

"Did you find any trolls this time?" Valhallarama asked with a comforting smile.

"I was looking for gnomes," Hiccup sheepishly admitted, "but the twins tied me to a tree."



"I will have a word with Ruffcloth about those two troublemakers," Valhallarama said as she handed her son a piece of warm bread. "You could have gobbled up by a dragon."

"You don't have to do that," Hiccup grumbled. While his mother meant well, he would only become the Thorstons' favorite walking target.

"Nonsense," Stoick argued. "I think its about time those two scoundrels learned a lesson."

"Nothing too harsh, dear," his wife smiled. "I remember tying your little brother to the mast of a fishing boat."

Stoick stifled a chuckle as he recalled the memory of his future wife and himself dragging a gagged Spitelout out of his bed in the middle of the night. It had been one of the many bonding experiences prior their marriage.

"I can handle this," Hiccup interjected. "Why don't you believe me?"

"We do, son. It's just this is not a one time thing."

"It's only happened a couple of times."

"More like once a week," Stoick grumbled. "If it's not the twins, it is your cousin running you scared from a pretend giant."

Hiccup silently dug into his bowl. He usually heard this argument after a misadventure in the forests surrounding Berk.

After Hiccup finally scurried up into his loft, Stoick joined his wife in servicing their weapons. While his wife preferred the blade of the sword, Stoick wanted to feel the crushing power of a good hammer.

"What are you going to do, Val?"

"He'll grow out of it," his wife replied as she turned her attention to her shield. She noted several of the boards were beginning to split. At least this one had lasted three raids, but it was sign she no longer took a very active role in the battles. Since Gothi pronounced she could no longer bear children, Stoick had reluctantly allowed her to command the catapults along the shores of Berk. He had insisted she man the catapult overlooking the Kill Ring. It was rarely attacked except during the larger raids. She had cracked her shield on the head of a curious terror that had lagged behind the main raiding party.

"The boy lacks focus, perhaps it's time he took an apprenticeship."

Valhallarama discard her broken shield by the door. While she followed the path of shieldmaiden, most children would often follow in the trade of their parents. Stoick had been apprenticed to a fisherman to learn the ways of the sea until he was eligible for dragon training. Afterwards, he aided his father Jorgen in the administration of the village.

"It is probably for the best," she agreed. "Did you have anyone in mind?"

Stoick placed down his hammer and stared into the fire. "Gobber is a bit short handed."

"He keeps running off his apprentices with his wild tales," Valhallarama laughed. "Each worried about being caught in the crossfire between Gobber and some avenging god that he angered."

Stoick groaned as he recalled Gobber's last apprentice. He only lasted three days before he disappeared from the forge. A month later, they found the poor child half-starved hiding in a cave near the burial grounds. Apparently the fear of the draugr was less terrifying than Gobber's tall-tales.

"Hiccup is a bit different himself," she mused, "and he does enjoy listening to Gobber's adventures."

"It might fill the boy with more harebrained ideas, but at least we'll be able to find him for dinner."

Valhallarama motioned for Stoick to follow her to their bedroom in the back of the ground floor. She expected her son to resist any appointment which required time away from his adventuring in the wilds of Berk.

"Absolutely not," Gobber shouted over the clanging of his hammer against the sword blade laying on his anvil. "No offense, Stoick, but your boy is a walking disaster. Are you sure you want him near so many sharp objects?"

"Look, Gobber, you have too much on your plate with all your repairs," Stoick answered as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Plus, you don't have the best record with retaining your helpers."

Gobber furrowed his brow at the mention of his former apprentices. The longest he had kept one was almost six months. The lad had opted to join a two-year expedition in the southern seas. It had been the best for the boy as he returned with a raven-haired beauty for a wife.

"Just on a trial basis," Gobber sighed. He paused his hammering for a moment and looked up at Stoick with a stern face. "And I am not liable for any lost limbs."

"So long as they're yours, I don't see that being a problem," Stoick laughed. "Aside from getting into trouble, the boy has Loki's own luck for getting out it as well."

Gobber returned his attention to the weapon he was forging as Stoick left to find his son. Like many in the village, Gobber had his misgivings about the young Haddock, but the boy was willing to learn anything. He might not retain everything like his friend Fishlegs, but Hiccup would make an honest effort.

"Excuse me."

Gobber turned from his work to see his newest apprentice at the door to the forge. Hiccup gave the blacksmith a nervous smile.

"Come on in, boy," Gobber bellowed. "You can start by sweeping the floor."

"Yes, sir."

The day went smoothly except when Hiccup had attempted to sweep some hot embers and set his broom ablaze. While he ran about with the now flaming broom, Gobber grabbed the stick out of his hands and dunked into a bucket of water. With the flames now doused, Gobber instructed the boy to avoid the glowing embers with a straw broom.

After Gobber sent Hiccup home for the night, he went through his list of orders. Tomorrow he would start the boy on sharpening some of the blades with a whetstone.

Suddenly, the alarm went out in the setting sun.

"Dragons!" the shouts sounded throughout the village. Gobber grimaced as he looked at the pile of unfinished weapons. He picked up the first sword and began pedalling the grindstone. It was going to be another sleepless night.

Valhallarama laughed haughtily as she slashed the head of a nader from its neck. Her catapult team had dispersed a murder of naders that were attacking the Kill Ring. Bucket and Mulch were her spotters tonight, and Bucket's keen eye was serving her well. The man could almost predict the dragons' flight path perfectly.

"Incoming nader," Bucket shouted. Valhallarama smirked as she kicked the carcass off the catapult deck. She had not seen this much action in years. Ever since Hiccup's birth, Stoick had been too overprotective for his own good. Laughing, she joined Mulch's attacking on the offending dragon.

Elsewhere in the village, Stoick frowned at the sunset sky. Little warning was given prior to the raid. Normally, the forerunning terrible terrors would announce the coming battle. This time, the dragons attacked in mass. Half of the sheep were already lost to the snapping jaws of the zipplebacks.

The nightmares had not been seen so far, but their absence had not decreased the number of gronckles and naders.

"Damn pests." Stoick turned and saw Spitelout kick a hapless terror down the hillside. "We've rounded up all the strays. We've accounted for most of the yaks, but we might be a little short of wool this winter."

"We'll deal with those matters later," Stoick sighed. "Any nightmares?"

"None so far, but the night is young."

Stoick smirked at his younger brother's pun. "I'm heading down to the plaza. You make sure the western fields..."

Stoick was abruptly interrupted as the dock catapult exploded in a

violet haze. "By Thor's beard." Stoick and Spitelout were dazed by the remnants of the ancient weapons hanging from its perch.

"Change of plans. Find any suitable archers and head to the catapults."

"Yes, sir." Spitelout shouted over his shoulder as he raced back into the fray.

Stoick himself marched down into the plaza with a tight grip on his hammer. A nadder launched itself from between two houses, but Stoick did not bat an eye when he brought the hammer down its head, cracking the dragon's skull. Stoick did not bother to collect a trophy from the body. He was on a mission to save his village.

"Stoick, Thor has turned against us," a woman cried.

"Helga, it's an abomination, not Thor's wrath," Stoick reassured the distraught woman. "A night fury is attacking the catapults. Grab your bow and head to the western catapult."

While still physically nervous, Helga's voice did not betray herself. "Aye, chief."

The plaza was a chaotic tangle of terrors' snapping jaws, Vikings' weapons, and vast array of curses. A few of his warriors had fallen to the terrors' poisoned fangs. It was a mild paralysis, but they would be useless till morning.

"Chief," a voice cried from the mass. "There's no end of these little beasties."

Stoick eyed the large cask of water used by the bucket brigade. Knowing it would take nearly a month to replace and refill the large wooden barrel, he slammed his warhammer into the side of the cask. The vast amount of water flooded the plaza and washed away most of the terrible terrors.

"Ack, Hoark, clean up this mess. The rest of you, follow me."

Leaving behind the two Vikings, Stoick led the remaining defenders to Gobber's forge. Gobber was busily sharpening a sword when Stoick began to grab every bola, javelin, and bow on his stand.

"I always thought you preferred them on the ground."

"Not the time for jokes, Gobber," Stoick huffed as he tossed a javelin behind him. "We have a night fury circling overhead."

As if to clarify the statement, several docked boats exploded into a rain of falling wooden splinters. Gobber's jaw dropped when he saw the destruction.

"I think I have a few more spears in the back. Not the best for throwing, but you should manage with them."

Stoick nodded and sent the defenders to various possible targets throughout the village. It was impossible to tell how many of the devils flew overhead.

"A lot of commotion down in the village," Bucket commented from his perch on the catapult. "Looks like the docks took a major blow."

Valhallarama frowned at the destruction, but that was Stoick's problem. She had finally repealed an invading murder of gronckles.

"Keep your eyes on the sky," she commanded her two spotters. "They've been particularly aggressive tonight."

A loud wail broke the silence. The iron cage that enclosed the Kill Ring suddenly disappeared in the violet light of dragon fire.

"Odin protect us," Mulch gasped. "What was that?"

Bucket and Valhallarama scanned the skies for the possible culprit. The wail returned, and the Kill Ring received another blast of the violet dragon fire.

"I have a bad feeling about this."

"Quiet, Mulch." Valhallarama ordered. The blast had appeared out of the night air, but the dragon could not disappear in the cloudless sky.

A third terrible wail sounded directly above them.

"Troll spit," Valhallarama cursed before a blast of violet light engulfed her.

Stoick grimaced as he stared at the line of wrapped bodies in the village plaza. In one night, thirteen Vikings crossed the rainbow bridge into Valhalla. One in particular captured his attention. They had only been able to identify her by the half melt breastplate found among the catapult wreckage.

"Mulch just lost an arm and leg," Spitelout informed him. "Gothi is still not sure about Bucket. He took a nasty blow to the head."

Whether Bucket pulled through or not was out of Stoick's hands. Only the Norns knew if he would live to see another sunset.

Looking away from his wife, he saw Gothi's young apprentice helping Hiccup with his own grief. The boy was crying as a newborn babe, but Stoick did not have the fortitude to correct his son. He would rather join him, but the village needed its chief.

"Have you made a list of all the damages?"

"The Kill Ring, docks, and dragon pens will need to be completely rebuilt. All of the catapults need repairs, but only the Kill Ring and dock catapults were destroyed. Five houses were completely destroyed, and all of the rest need some repairs."

Stoick closed his eyes as he absorbed the information. The beasts had taken over half of their sheep, but they had destroyed most of the Berk's defenses. The addition of the Night Fury was a detrimental

blow to the Vikings. Despite the amount of destruction it had wrought, no one could even describe the monster or count how many actually attacked the village.

"I'm going to see Gobber about the catapult and Kill Ring repairs." Stoick left Spitelout to tend to Berk's fallen warriors. Once Gothi was done healing the wounded, the dead would have their turn.

The village was bustling with activity. Everywhere, people were repairing their homes. Even the children aiding their parents.

The clanging of the anvil greeted the chief as he entered the forge. Gobber was happily singing as he pounded on the red-hot metal plate.

"\_I've got my axe, and I've got my mace, and I love my wife with the ugly face. I'm a viking through and through."\_

Only Gobber could still find some joy after such a horrific lose. His perpetual optimism was the only thing that could bring a smile to Stoick today.

"Gobber, how long until the catapults are fixed?"

Gobber paused in his merry work and looked up at his friend. The happy face quickly fell into a frown.

"Look, I'm sorry about Val and all."

Stoick narrowed his eyes at his old friend. "It's just an occupational hazard."

Gobber shook his head and continued to work on the iron plate.

"The eastern and western catapults should be fixed in a day or two. The dock and Kill Ring ones could take months."

Stoick only sighed at the blacksmith's estimate. He feared the two destroyed would not be easily replaced.

"Now where is that apprentice you promised me?"

"Crying over his mother."

Gobber stopped his hammering and looked at his old friend. "And why are you not with him?"

"The village is shambles. The village needs its chief."

"And a boy needs his father."

"The Hofferson girl is looking after him. It will be good training for her when she replaces Old Gothi."

Gobber shook his head and began rummaging through his pile of damaged weaponry. "Gothi still has some time left in her."

"Never too young to learn your trade, I say."

"Well, just as long as you know what you're doing." Gobber shoved a

helmet into Stoick's chest. "Just try keep your head on your shoulders."

Stoick looked down at the helmet in his hands. It was thicker than a typical helmet with short yak horns for ornamentation. He looked up to see Gobber shoving the iron plate back into the coals.

"What's this for? I still have a decent helm."

"Never too early to replace your gear, I say," Gobber smirked. "I figured I find some use with the scrap metal."

"Give to someone who needs it."

"I just did. I made it out of Valhallarama's chestplate. Thought you might like to keep a piece of her close. I can have a spare one for you this afternoon."

Stoick stared at the helmet dumbfoundedly. Gobber turned back to the forge and continued his work. Stoick quietly removed the helm on his head and placed on Gobber's stall. He replaced it with Gobber's gift and walked away to survey the village.

An exhausted Astrid Hofferson pushed opened the door of her home. After helping her grandmother with the wounded, she spent most the day comforting a grief stricken Hiccup. The boy had cried for the better part of an hour and was a mass of sniffles until his father collected him to aid in the village repairs.

She was surprised to see her family waiting for her by the hearth. Her father should have been fixing the damaged roof while her mother was aiding the other women preparing the village feast that normally followed a raid. Even more unsettling, her grandmother was sitting by the hearth, sipping a cup warmed yak milk.

"Astrid, have seat."

She looked at her father and wondered what she had done wrong. During the raid, she helped her grandmother in the Great Hall. She had performed all the tasks assigned to her without question and hopefully flawlessly. She took the seat next to her grandmother, waiting to be told how she had failed this time.

"Your grandmother has been noticing you watching the other children train with the wooden dragons."

"Father, I..."

"We are therefore giving you a choice."

Magnus nodded towards the table. Lying side by side were Gothi's staff and her mother's double-headed ax. Astrid looked back at her parents. She did not understand what was occurring.

"When you were born, I saw you leading this village," Gothi spoke in her raspy voice. "I had believed you take my place as priestess, but you do not seem have the heart for it."

Gothi held up her hand when Astrid attempted to deny the charge. "There is nothing wrong with that. Neither your mother nor your aunt

accepted this duty, but I foolishly tried to force you."

"You may chose to follow after your mother as a shieldmaiden. We will begin your training immediately, but don't expect it to be easy."

Astrid stared at the two objects before her. She extended her hand and made her choice.

End  
file.